

PLOTTING A COURSE

Looking
for the
real story
behind the
granddaddy
of golf trails

BY DEREK DUNCAN

Built on former mining land owned by US Steel, **OXMOOR VALLEY** is home to 54 tough holes of golf. The Ridge Course (shown here) challenges golfers with precipitous 150-foot elevation changes, rollercoaster fairways and heavy tree cover.

ROBERT TRENT JONES GOLF TRAIL/MICHAEL CLEMMER

Midway through my round at Hampton Cove's River Course in Huntsville, the northeasternmost outpost on Alabama's Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, I realize that I have absolutely no idea where I am.

The holes have been winding deeper and deeper on this 7,668-yard beast of a course laid out on former soybean fields on the vast flood plain of the Flint River,

championship holes (plus another few dozen par-3 holes) spanning 11 locations across Alabama. The courses are designed to be the ultimate golf road trip, not just

tion and intent, they are difficult. (The two at Hampton Cove are actually among the trail's tamest.)

From Huntsville, I drive west to The Shoals in Muscle Shoals. Opened in 2004, it's one of the trail's newest locations. The two courses there drift in and out of woodland and meadow settings, each finishing dramatically atop bluffs overlooking the Tennessee River. The Fighting Joe course is named for Confederate Gen. Joe Wheeler,

creator, designing or renovating nearly 500 courses across 35 countries. Along the way he pioneered the concept of the name-brand, jet-setting architect, and he didn't earn his reputation by building forgettable golf courses. Of all his design innovations—including long runway tees that offer maximum flexibility, huge jigsaw-shaped bunkers, enormous putting surfaces with distinct tiers and pin placements—perhaps the most important

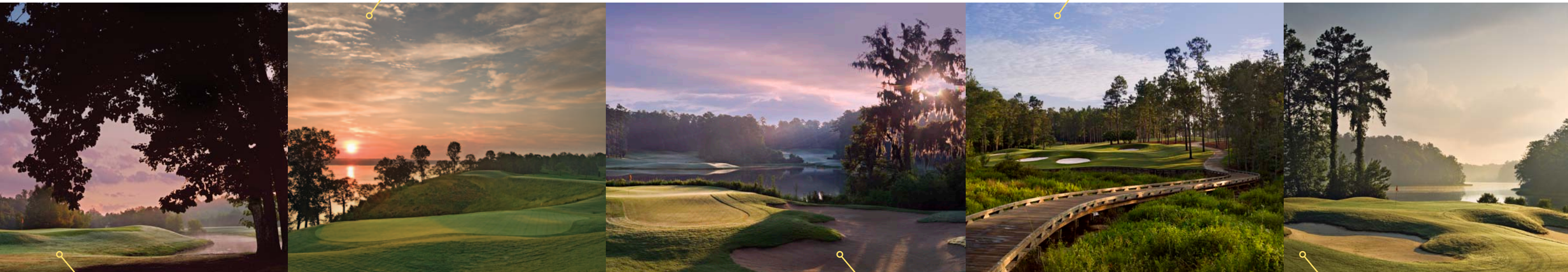
HAVING TRAVELED AND WRITTEN about the trail before, I'm quite familiar with much of the backstory, which has taken on a kind of mythological telling around these parts. But I'd never heard how Jones became involved. As the well-known part of the tale goes, Dr. David Bronner, the CEO of the Retirement Systems of Alabama and visionary/gadfly behind the creation of the trail, invested more than \$100 million from the state pension fund in

ism dollars in Alabama have soared from less than \$2 billion to nearly \$10 billion. The goodwill and changing reputation the trail helped foster was just the hook Bronner needed to lure major industry to the state, the jewel being Mercedes-Benz, which opened the company's only US manufacturing plant in Tuscaloosa in 1997.

When I visit Bronner at his top-floor Montgomery office, he happily details all of this, giving me the opportunity to ask how he recruited

"**THE SHOALS** is big, wide and long, and everything is large in scale. You can go from an 8,000-yard monster with a traditional parkland-style feel down to the 8,000-yard Fighting Joe course (shown here), which takes on a links-type feel." —John Cannon

"Some of the remodeling we've done at **MAGNOLIA GROVE** has softened things a bit. We haven't made it easier, but we've taken out some of the difficulties, especially on the greens, which were severely contoured." —Roger Rulewich



"The courses at **HAMPTON COVE** are polar opposites. The Highlands is a sporty parkland course.... On the River Course (shown here), you're winding through rivers and lagoons. You lose your points of reference." —John Cannon, President of SunBelt Golf, which operates the trail

"The challenge of the water, bunkers and contoured putting surfaces are all visible in this hole on the short course at **CAMBIAN RIDGE**." —Roger Rulewich

"A true water course, **GRAND NATIONAL** was Trent's favorite. He would tell me, 'David, I've never had an opportunity to put 38 of the 54 holes on the water. That's unheard of.'" —Dr. David Bronner

with water on 16 of the 18 holes. Moreover, there are no bunkers on the course—none—and therefore no reference points or indicators of depth or distance. It's a strange, disorienting golf experiment, and I feel like I'm a rat in a maze of wilderness miles away from any civilized laboratory. I hope someone will send out a recon team if I'm not back by dark.

As unsettling as such a scenario may sound, it's a common occurrence on the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, a network of 378

because you can easily drive from one site to the next and experience wide swings in scenery and atmosphere, but also because they don't always inspire visitors to linger for days. The courses are like summer blockbusters that trade nuance for showmanship. With prodigious yardages, tee shots cutting over lakes, enormous jagged-edged bunkers invading rambling fairways and greens 60 yards deep with high, stair-stepped levels, it's not golf you savor. You don't play them so much as survive them, and, yes, by reputa-

and parts of it even look like a razed and shelled Civil War battlefield, as if golf holes were laid out between old earthen fortifications. Playing it can seem futile, like making fateful charges against its superior defenses of water, sand and prairie grasses.

That golfers have long associated the trail's namesake, Robert Trent Jones, with "difficulty" is nothing new. Born in England and raised in Rochester, NY, Jones spent more than half of the 20th century as the world's best known and most marketable golf course

was his use of the "heroic" school of architecture, in which robust sand or water hazards are used to create black-and-white risk-reward shots.

As I head toward Birmingham and Oxmoor Valley's forested, escalator slopes and bizarre green complexes—racking up bogeys and three-putts along the way—I wonder if the trail isn't extreme even by Jones' standards. At the time the first courses were developed in the early '90s, Jones was well into his 80s. Is this really the work of an octogenarian?

1990 to build seven multicourse golf complexes at various locales across the state—even against pensioner outrage. (Today, the project approaches the \$200 million mark.) Bronner was banking on the fact that public golf could be the catalyst for rehabilitating Alabama's woeful economic and cultural reputation. ("You have to remember that... 15 years ago Alabama was 48th, 49th and 50th in everything," Bronner would later tell me.)

It worked. From the time the first courses opened in 1992, annual tour-

Jones, basically retired and with no real connection to Alabama, to become the trail's headliner.

Bronner tells me about the replies he received after soliciting some of golf's best-known architects in 1989 to build the trail's first courses. One rejection came via a form letter, he says. One insisted Bronner couldn't afford the architect's top-quality signature work and suggested a lesser design package. Another letter informed him that he probably didn't intend to build a trail, but rather a resort complex

MICHAEL CLEMMER

THE STARCHITECT
Robert Trent Jones was in his 80s when he took on the project in Alabama.



"The true genius of the trail is how it shows off aspects of Alabama most players would never know existed."

using different designers, similar to what was happening elsewhere in the country.

"In other words, they were telling me what my idea was," Bronner says, leaning back and savoring the aroma of a sharply clipped Cohiba as he passes it back and forth under his nose. Needless to say, Bronner told them to buzz off.

So there was my answer: Jones' name is on the first and most emulated golf trail in the world because he was the one who said "yes."

Jones' professional heirs might have scoffed at Bronner's out-of-the-box thinking, but Roger Rulewich, who joined Jones' firm as an associate in 1961 and was the lead designer

for roughly 25 years, says Jones was willing to talk to anybody about a project. "Jones' response was, 'Let's see what they're talking about,'" Rulewich says. "And it turned out they were talking about an awful lot."

But was Jones, who died in 2000, involved in the actual design and construction? Rulewich says that given his age and the scope and speed of construction, Jones could only be tangentially involved from afar, although he showed up on several occasions with his sketches of greens. (Bronner recalls Rulewich coming to him and saying, "You know, he's got his sketchbook out now and he's driving us all crazy!")

Even though Jones wasn't involved day to day, his historical imprimatur exists at every location. If there's a unifying theme across the trail, it's the sprawling, lacy-edged bunkering, a hallmark of Jones' style. Rulewich also says the extreme green contour, another of the trail's calling cards, is really an "amplification" of the movements Jones normally preferred.

Rulewich and project manager Bobby Vaughan handled all aspects of the ambitious three-year project, scrambling more than 500 miles between the sites in a whirlwind of logistics and improvisation, often working on the fly with no design plans other than basic routing maps while employing hundreds of workers and 700 pieces of equipment.

Difficulty aside, the true genius of the trail is how it shows off aspects of Alabama most players would never know existed. Most first-time visitors are shocked by Birmingham's mountain-like terrain surrounding Oxmoor Valley and Ross Bridge. At Cambrian Ridge in Greenville, three unique nines camber along a pocket of abrupt foothills with holes jumping across natural lakes, ridges and canyons. The Lake and Links courses at Grand National outside Auburn, meanwhile, sashay intimately around the jigsaw shore of Lake

Saugahatchee.

In the last few years, the trail's power center has shifted south to Mobile, where the original Magnolia Grove complex has undergone extensive renovations to modernize the courses and make them slightly more player friendly. The trail also purchased and restored the Lakewood Golf Club in Point Clear on the eastern shore of Mobile Bay, where 36 holes saunter through serene groves of Southern dogwood and ancient oaks. Two historic hotels, each more than 150 years old—The Grand Hotel next to Lakewood Golf Club and the Battle House Hotel in downtown Mobile—were also purchased and fully restored.

THERE'S SOME IRONY IN THE FACT

that a major part of Jones' legacy is tied to a network of Southern courses he didn't actually design (not to mention that Alabama's moribund economy was revived by the image of a Yankee). But while the trail would likely have looked different had someone else built it, it's hard to imagine how it could be any more successful. The quality of golf speaks for itself, and the 500,000 rounds the trail draws every year are a resounding measure of its entertainment value. By the time you've swung your way through the state, doubt about its origins hardly matters.

I ask Bronner if he's ever met the architects who turned him down, or if any have ever expressed remorse or chagrin. Not only that, he says, they let him know they're now available if he ever wants to do another similar project. Bronner pauses to finally light that cigar. "And I just smile." ●

For more information on the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, visit rtjgolf.com

AirTran Airways provides daily, low-fare flights to Huntsville, AL, and Pensacola, FL. **Visit airtran.com for more information.**

Course Notes

The Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail offers stunning landscapes and some of the toughest golf you'll ever face. For the full experience, start or finish your trip in Huntsville, AL, or Pensacola, FL.

THE SHOALS (2004), MUSCLE SHOALS two 18-hole courses

Each course tips out at roughly 8,000 yards and finishes looking over the Tennessee River, but they get there in completely different ways.

OXMOOR VALLEY (1992), BIRMINGHAM two 18-hole courses, 18-hole short course

These courses plunge down off a ridge and highlight some of the trail's most rugged elevation changes.

ROSS BRIDGE (2005), HOOVER 18-hole course

Circling on hillsides sloping up from two central lakes, this goliath course is reportedly the fourth longest in the world, at nearly 8,200 yards.

CAPITOL HILL (1999), PRATTVILLE three 18-hole courses

The distinct courses include the Irish links-inspired Senator Course and the Judge, an engineering marvel laid out by the Army Corps of Engineers in the shoals of the Alabama River.

MAGNOLIA GROVE (1992), MOBILE two 18-hole courses, 18-hole short course

The two classically modeled and newly renovated courses roam a pristine forested property cut with streams, ponds and wetlands.

Pensacola

LAKEWOOD GOLF CLUB (2004), POINT CLEAR two 18-hole courses

The trail purchased these Perry Maxwell-designed courses (plus the Grand Hotel Marriott Resort) on the eastern shore of Mobile Bay in 2004, completing a \$50 million renovation in 2010.

HAMPTON COVE (1992), HUNTSVILLE two 18-hole courses, 18-hole short course

Two extremes—the genteel, wooded Highlands Course and the bunkerless River Course—are routed through the flood plain of a vast nature preserve.

SILVER LAKES (1993), GADSDEN three 9-hole courses, 9-hole short course

Golfers battle huge serpentine greens, uphill holes and dense trees at the aptly named Mindbreaker, Heartbreaker and Backbreaker courses.

GRAND NATIONAL (1992), OPELIKA/AUBURN two 18-hole courses, 18-hole short course

Often the highest rated courses on the trail, the Lake and Links courses span the coves and inlets of a scenic lake.

HIGHLAND OAKS (1993), DOTHAN three 9-hole courses, 9-hole short course

"Comfortable" is the best way to describe these pastoral nines marked with ancient trees.

CAMBRIAN RIDGE (1993), GREENVILLE three 9-hole courses, 9-hole short course

Three exotic nines bound through a pure setting of lakes, ridges and canyons.

ILLUSTRATION BY SHANE LUITJENS